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ABSTRACT

Concerns regarding death education and its quest for professional maturity are considered. The following issues are addressed: teacher preparation and quality control, student outcomes, course content, consumer acceptance, and research/assessment. Questions pertaining to teachers include whether they have specialized skills to teach death education and whether they are competent to teach adults and young children, and what methods of self-development they have utilized in preparation for the teaching role. Administrators must insure that teachers assigned to death education have undergone significant development via course work, perusal of literature, participation in appropriate training programs, and other accepted means. Teachers must not only be prepared in the subject matter, they must feel comfortable discussing it. Currently, there is no licensure/certification of teachers of death education. Authorities generally view the broad goals of death education as including information about death-related phenomena, affective aspects that encompass the examination and clarification of personal values, consumer concerns, and sociopsychological and ethical issues related to death. It is suggested that an interdisciplinary approach to instruction can best achieve expected outcomes. Course enrollments at the university level continue to be strong and even must be limited in many situations. It is anticipated that education for adults about the death of children and children's reaction to death will be important concerns. Limited research has been published on death education and has focused on attitude assessment. The knowledge base must be expanded through controlled research supportive of the educational enterprise. (SW)

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DEATH EDUCATION'S QUEST FOR MATURITY

by

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DEATH EDUCATION'S QUEST FOR MATURITY

The death and dying movement proliferated beyond the expectations of many prognosticators during the past ten years or so both within the popular culture and formal schooling. In fact, the demise of death education was predicted as early as the mid 1970s. There are a variety of reasons for this unexpected growth and these have been well documented through various professional sources.

Outside school settings, the death movement has been fueled by a variety of mass media sources including newspapers, semi-professional and popular journals, television and movies. This type of media has usually focused on sensational news stories and highlighted controversial issues surrounding the beginning and ending of life such as abortions and euthanasia. Within educational settings, death education has emerged as an attractive and worthwhile academic undertaking. Current estimates, coupled with some credible data, suggest that most major colleges and universities throughout the country offer some approach to the study of death and dying. This usually means that death education is being taught either as an independent unit, an interdisciplinary exercise, or as a full-fledged course within some academic department. At the college and university level, it is being offered by a mixture of academic departments, including sociology and social work, psychology, philosophy, religious studies, nursing education,

medical education, health education, and general education. A recent survey by this investigator identified 50 such courses alone within health education divisions/departments.[1]

These academic courses have been quite popular among undergraduate and graduate students, and while enrollments have stabilized in some universities, others report enrollments on the upswing. One academic at a major university has stated on a number of occasions that his course enrollment is limited to the first 200 registrants. Other instructors report that multiple sections are offered, while still others speak of courses being offered simultaneously in two or three departments. These courses are managed much like other courses in terms of methodology, credit given, and utilization of assessment techniques.

While accurate, comprehensive figures are not available, several sources suggest that death education is offered with some frequency in secondary schools. The literature also reflects examples of pedagogical efforts at the elementary school level.[2] Furthermore, there is some research that summarizes attitudes of parents and teachers toward the "teachable moment" approach to death education within early childhood education programs.[3]

The death education movement is being strongly supported via the cooperation of professional societies (e.g., The Forum for Death Education and Counseling, The Foundation of Thanatology, Center for Death Education and Research, and the American Association of Suicidology), semi-professional and

trade organizations, and self-help groups within particular communities. The production of scholarly and scientific literature has been enormous in recent years. Some bibliographic sources list books and periodical entries that number in the thousands. Even general book stores acknowledge the sudden interest in the subject among consumers by designating a "death and dying" section within the establishment. Several scholarly journals are now being published including Death Education, Omega, Essence, Thanatos, and Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior.[4] These journals publish papers on research, pedagogy, counseling, and care. Other specialized periodicals, especially within the health field, continue to devote considerable space to death-related subjects.

Death education is quickly becoming of age as an established phenomenon within the nation's academic institutions. And as long as death is inevitable, it is unlikely that educators will run out of material to investigate and analyze. The need for confrontation with death and death-related phenomena will always exist; it is only a mater of how we wish to do that. Simpson states it well:

> We are not free to choose whether anyone will learn about death, though we have some choice about how they will learn . . . Death education will occur whether we wish it to or not. Like sex, death is a very badly kept secret, and everyone learns about it eventually.[5]

It is not the intent of this paper to establish rationale in support of death education. This has been done on many previous occasions and the literature is replete with such information. Instead, what follows is a brief discourse relative to some ongoing concerns affecting the stability of death education.

Unfinished Business

As within any emerging field of study, there are engaging issues that attend death education and its quest for professional maturity. A few of these are identified.

·Teacher Preparation and Quality Control. Who are the teachers of death education? What specialized skills do they possess? Are they competent to teach adults and young children? And, what methods of self-development have they utilized in preparation for the pedagogical role? Both parents and administrators need answers to these questions. Perhaps too little effort has gone into screening would-be teachers and to the ongoing development of those currently teaching. Consequently, members of the teaching profession who possess a variety of skills, interests, and expertise are now serving as "death educators." Undoubtedly, many are unqualified to teach death education and may be doing more harm than good. When one entrepreneuring teacher was asked recently about his own preparation for teaching a university-level death education course, his reply was, "I heard Kubler-Ross speak on one occasion." No doubt this was a good exercise, but not sufficient preparation for teaching a university course. This practice must be eliminated. As Simpson has stated, "Death is

infinitely exploitable, and the growth of voyeurism via 'education' is alarming."[6] And, as Feifel has observed: "A spreading and somewhat disquieting aftermath in response to increasing public receptivity to the field and its current trendiness is the entrance . . . of dabblers, dilettantes, and seekers of the fast buck."[7] According to this eminent thanatologist, these opportunists must be driven from the temple.

School principals, college and university deans must insure students and their parents that teachers assigned to death education have undergone significant development via course work, perusal of literature, participation in appropriate colloquia/workshops/seminars and other accepted means. Teachers must not only be prepared in the subject matter; they must also feel comfortable discussing it. If death education is to assume a proper role in our cultural upbringing as "a preparation for living,"[8] we then need to insure more quality control. This means that only qualified and effective instructors are assigned to pedagogical roles and that they are provided with a support system capable of enhancing instruction. Insuring quality teaching for death education students may be even more critical than for other subjects.

Unfortunately, there is no vehicle currently in existence for the purpose of providing licensure/certification of teachers of death education. The international Forum on Death Education and Counseling, however, is strongly committed to upgrading death education and counseling. Consequently, it

has established committees for the purpose of developing guidelines that may offer some future help toward the selection and preparation of teachers.

·Student Outcomes. What should be accomplished in a death education class? What attitudes are educators attempting to shape? Perhaps the answers depend upon specific goals formulated for the class. While there are differing opinions about what should be included in any course and how it should be taught, the overall goal of death education is to enable learners to live full lives once they have internalized the concept of death.[9] Death education is education about death and dying to be sure, but it is more. It focuses on various dimensions surrounding the ending of life; but in so doing, it gives added meaning to the living process.

Authorities generally view the broad goals of death education as including (1) information/facts about death-related phenomena, (2) affective aspects that encompass the examination and clarification of personal values, (3) consumer concerns, and (4) sociopsychological and ethical issues related to death. Again, these can be tailored to meet the comprehension level of particular students. With very young students, the major focus may be that of understanding death -- what it is, what it means, and the attitudes held by different segments of the population toward death and dying. At the higher education level the major focus may be that of delving into more controversial areas such as abortions and euthanasia and probing potential consequences of a nuclear holocaust.

The thrust here would center more on philosophical and abstractual concepts as contrasted with younger students.

·Course Content. Much like other controversial areas such as sex education, the question arises as to appropriate course content. What should be taught, to whom, and at what age or grade level? Logically, any course should be tailored to the specific needs, interests, and age of learners. The experience that students have had also is of some import in delineating specific curricula offerings.

Death education courses can deal with a large variety of topics. The content is multidisciplinary and cuts across religion, ethics, law, medicine, sociology, psychology, health education, among other disciplines. This fact alone presents a dilemma for course planners as the educational experience is shaped for particular learners. This diversity also provides a great deal of latitude for both teacher and student and can be a source of excitement and potential. Due to its diverse nature, an interdisciplinary approach to instruction can best achieve expected outcomes.

While there is a scarcity of notable publications dealing with death education curricula, a variety of professional articles and a couple or so books have appeared that identify units for specific classes or age levels.[10] The reader should find these useful. There exists a need for qualified curriculum planners and course designers to chart the proper direction for death education as it departs the early "fascination" stage and enters a period of more serious and intense examination.

·Consumer Acceptance. Students at all levels of education have eagerly supported death education in recent years. Reasons given by students for matriculating in death education courses typically range from curiosity, to development of coping mechanisms, to a desire to comprehend more fully death and dying phenomena. As noted earlier, course enrollments at the university level continue to be strong and even must be limited in many situations. It is important to ask, however, "How long will this trend continue?" Will death education in five to ten years "die" out? Once over the initial period of curiosity and fascination, will there no longer be a student market? Can educators expect taxpayers to continue supporting the cost of instruction of a course that may not be considered to be among the "basics?" During a period of austere budgets and diminishing programs, will tight-fisted administrators support it? On the other hand, will they see such classes as vehicles for attracting students thus adding additional numbers to departmental rolls?

It is unlikely that death education will grow into a strong entity for very young children within the near future. There appears to be some resistance by parents to this.[11] A similar kind of resistance has been noted in the past relative to other controversial subjects. As with sex education, some parents feel that death education belongs within the purview of the home or church. By utilizing capable instructors, however, and by carefully articulating concepts to be pursued much of the resistance by parents can be allayed.

It is anticipated that education for adults about the death of children and related phenomena such as children's understanding of and reaction to death, will emerge as an important and relevant course of study during the next decade or so. Some existing workshops have already received high acclaim.

·Research/Assessment. Death educators are at their weakest when presenting scientific rationale in support of instruction. To date, limited research has been published that addresses the import of instruction. Leviton, a pioneering death educator, identifies the issue:

> The need for research to determine more fully the effects of death education is obvious. We need to know what is happening to our students, under what conditions, and for how long. Most of the research accomplished thus far in the field of death education has been essentially descriptive, although a few investigators have used sophisticated experimental designs.[12]

Published research has focused primarily on attitude assessment utilizing a simple pretest, treatment (instruction), posttest design. These efforts have produced data of limited use to the death educator. Perhaps the major question here is "What attitudes are educators attempting to shape?" Are there desirable and undesirable attitudinal changes following instruction? Is there an acceptable manner of viewing death and dying which should be followed? Must students conform to

group expectations relative to loss and grief reactions? If one's attitudes are not altered by several weeks of instruction, has the course experience been unproductive? More research is obviously needed as Leviton suggests, and death educators must move ahead in order to develop a scholarly base highly supportive of instruction. Research is also necessary in order to determine the long range impact of a death education experience on attitudes and behavior of students.

Assessment and research efforts must continue to expand not only in the area of attitude change but into such controversial topics as abortions, euthanasia, suicide and other forms of self-destructive behavior, and all forms of premature and unnecessary deaths. Without a nurturing spirit of scientific inquiry in support of educational objectives death education will not survive too long as a strong educational entity.

This brief overview of death education leads to three inescapable conclusions. First, death education is coming of age as evidenced by its popularity and frequency of offering within most levels of education. Second, there are issues and problems that must be confronted before it achieves a state of maturity. Quality control must be instituted at all levels. And third, the knowledge base must be expanded through controlled research that is supportive of the educational enterprise.

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1. Darrell Crase, "Death Education Within Health Education: Current Status, Future Directions," Journal of School Health, December 1981, pp. 646-650.

2. See James M. Mueller, "I Taught About Death and Dying," Phi Delta Kappan, October 1978, p. 117; and Melvin Maddocks, "In Florida: A Life and Death Class," Time, December 3, 1979, pp. 14-15.

3. Dixie R. Crase and Darrell Crase, "Attitudes Toward Death Education for Young Children," Death Education, Spring 1979, pp. 31-40; and Dixie R. Crase and Darrell Crase, "Parental Attitudes Toward Death Education for Young Children," Death Education, Spring 1982, pp. 61-78.

4. See Hannelore Wass et al, Death Education: An Annotated Resource Guide (Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere, 1980).

5. Michael A. Simpson, "Death Education -- Where Is Thy Sting?" Death Education, Summer, 1979, p. 166.

6. Ibid.

7. Herman Feifel, "The Death Movement," In Richard A. Pacholski and Charles A. Corr (eds.), New Directions in Death Education and Counseling (Arlington, Va.: Forum for Death Education and Counseling, 1981), p. xiv.

8. Herman Feifel, "Death and Dying in Modern America," Death Education, Spring 1977, p. 11.

9. Kathleen H. Middleton, "Death Education Comes of Age," In Robert D. Russell (ed.), Education In the 80s: Health Education (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1981), p. 101.

10. See Audrey K, Gordon and Dennis Klass, They Need to Know: How to Teach Children About Death (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1979); R.O. Ulin, Death and Dying Education (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1977); Melody Noland et al, "The Systematic Development and Efficacy of a Death Education Unit for Ninth Grade Girls," Death Education, Spring 1980, pp. 43-60; Joan D. McMahon, "A Unit for Independent Study in Death Education," School Health Review, July/August 1973, pp. 27-34; and Aileen Silverman, "Development of Content and Objectives for a Curriculum in Death and Dying Education for Junior High School Students," doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1981.

11. Crase and Crase, "Parental Attitudes Toward Death Education."

12. Daniel Leviton, "Death Education," In Herman Feifel (ed.), New Meanings of Death (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 260.